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Mandi Sabun Mandi [Bath Soap]

A Short Story by Djenar Maesa Ayu

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The snout of a luxury car with super dark windows turned slowly in the direction of the narrow drive with signposts reading IN. The drive shifted a bit and curved with orderly ranks of ironwood and thorn tree to the left and right. The luxury car stopped a moment in front of the receptionist's office. There was no sign that the owner of the luxury car would get out of the car. A uniformed man rushed out from inside the office clutching a ring of keys in his hand and signaling the driver of the luxury car to follow. Like a snail the luxury car moved to follow the man toward an open space in the garage. Deftly the uniformed man closed the rolling door just a moment after the luxury car sank into the garage. But in less than a minute, the rolling door opened a little. The body of the uniformed man exited in a deeply stooped manner and closed it again. He ran to the receptionist's office, switched keys, turned back to the garage, opened the rolling door, waited for the luxury car to exit the garage, and hurried to a bigger space. He stopped at a space on the second level. As before, he adroitly closed the rolling garage door within a heartbeat of its swallowing the luxury car and its shadow.

"You do this, knowing it's a nice car, and still you give it a standard space!" shouted his uniformed colleague a second after he came out the garage's door, all the while shoving a tip of tens of thousands of rupiah into his pocket.

"How would I know. Not every luxury car wants a VIP space. Especially if they take women from here, usually they rent a standard space."

"Yeah but these bitches aren't like the neighborhood girls around here, huh? Could you see? How was she, outrageous?"

"Not outrageous, more...like an angel. Like a movie star!"

"Yeah, movie star probably..."

"You're right too, probably a movie star. If there's a kid here who's hot like that, I'd let a month's salary go just for a taste."

They let loose a laugh, then ran immediately when they saw two other cars lined up in front of the office.

The mirror in the room was wet with condensation, same as the reflection of the human couple tight and wet on the disheveled bed. It became clear that the sweating woman gasped, "fuck me...!"

"They're definitely not married. Hey, Table, I'm not faking like I know. I do know. I'm the oldest thing in this room. Without me, this motel wouldn't be in demand. You know, Table, a motel without a mirror is so out of date! What? Variation? Could be. But variations like this aren't variations of marriage, Table. You don't believe it? Just look at the evidence later, my bet is the old man came outside. Ugh...it's impossible not to understand, see...? He came outside because he's afraid the woman will get pregnant. Condom? You're crazy, time has left you behind, you're such an antique thing. These days men are more scared of knocking a woman up than of coming down with a disease!"

The mirror then reflected the image of both of them. Their eyes were half open, their heads tilted upward, and their mouths panted passion. Their bodies wriggled awkwardly, incoherently.

"Oh Allah, he came inside her!"

"What? You didn't see it wrong? If it's like that, this time I lost my bet, Table. Turns out he's not scared of getting her pregnant. Maybe it's true, they're a husband and wife looking for a variation."

"You didn't lose the bet, you were right, Mirror."

"Huh, what do you mean, Table?"

"He didn't come in her vagina. He came in her mouth!"

The young girl looked indo,¹ white-skinned with those grasshopper legs, in the middle of checking herself out in the mirror in front of the sink. She brushed her thin lips with color. A middle-aged man, big-bellied, washed himself in the stream of hot water from the shower. The indo woman opened a packet of soap and handed it over to the man, who immediately shoved it back at her.

"What, Mas,² afraid your wife will find out if you smell like different soap?" the expression on the indo woman's face sullen.

"Not that, I get allergic if I use just any old soap."

"You are the smartest when it comes to finding excuses, Mas."

"I don't have a lot of excuses, in fact just one excuse, I'm allergic to cheap soap!" he said while shutting off the shower tap and straight away drying his body with a towel.

"Prove it if you're brave. I want to see if you really are allergic."

"Your proposal doesn't make sense. I'm already finished, but I'm ordered to shower again?"

"Love doesn't make sense, Mas, doesn't use reason. Let's go, prove it in the name of love!"

"Enough, Dear, don't be childish like that..." Si Mas hurried out of the bathroom to avoid the fight and the risk of being caught in a lie by his indo lover. The indo woman joined him from behind, still naked. Si Mas indifferently got into his clothes.

"What's the rush? You don't want some more?" with a sense of entitlement and affection the indo woman reopened Si Mas's fly.

"Sophie...!"

Sophie knew then that Si Mas was getting serious from the way he called her name without the sweet nothing Dear. But Sophie didn't want to give in. Instead she showered Mas with kisses.

"Sophie, careful, your lipstick'll rub off on my shirt, damn!" Mas started to get angry and pull away.

"Mas is a coward! It's true isn't it, you're still scared of your wife, you fake! Saying you already have separate beds, you're in the process of divorce, the proof..."

"I have a meeting, Sophie...it's uncomfortable and inappropriate for our arrangement to be seen!"

"FAKE!" Sophie shouted while grabbing the clothes scattered on the floor, then headed immediately to the bathroom and slammed the door hard. Si Mas sighed. He turned his cellphone back on. Immediately the phone rang. The phrase home calling blinked on and off. Mas ran to the garage, fired up his car's engine, then answered the phone.

"What, your cellphone was dead earlier?"

"I've been in a meeting since earlier, just now finished, and now I'm on the road." Si Mas faked it, honking the horn. Suddenly the rolling door was opened from the outside. Si Mas glared in the direction of the uniformed man who had opened the rolling door and gestured to indicate he should close it again.

"Your secretary said you were at lunch, which one's true?"

The uniformed man stood open-mouthed in the same place. Si Mas glared harder, silently mouthing the words CLOSE THE DOOR.

"Hey...meeting or lunch?"

"After the meeting straight to lunch. That's it, right, Ma,³ the traffic is backed up..."

"Wait, you're driving yourself? Where's the driver?"

"When I was leaving the office earlier, I sent for a car from the car service that never showed up. Maybe he's having lunch too. Rather than be late, I drove myself. All right...?" Mas stopped talking and immediately shouted to the uniformed man, "Shut the door, moron!"

Sophie watched it all from behind the door of her room.

On the trip home Mas told the driver again and again to tell the Mrs. at home that earlier at eleven o'clock the driver hadn't been in his place because he was eating lunch. Clouds hung layered grey and red. The flicker of lights spangled the highway. Mas's mouth hummed his favorite song, which resounded from the CD, I don't like to sleep alone, stay with me don't go...

and immediately fell asleep with a faint smile on his lips.

Mas woke up when they arrived in front of the house. He loosened his tie and checked again for a compromising aroma still lingering on his body. After he was sure his situation was secure, Mas stepped with courage into the house.

"Where is the Mrs., Sum?" Mas asked the maid who now carried his briefcase.

"In your room, Sir," answered Sumiatun while bowing and edging slowly into the study.

Mas went straight for the master bedroom. His wife was reading in bed in a stimulating nightgown, but not enough to stimulate Si Mas, who suddenly felt his real age. Not like when he was by Sophie's side, he always felt far younger, strong and passionate. Si Mas unbuttoned his office clothes indifferently and asked his wife for his pajamas.

"No need to put clothes on yet, Pa...you look seriously tired, I'll massage you a little, yeah?"

Si Mas flung his body onto the pillowy, luxurious, king-sized bed and answered, "Just rub me with the coin, no need to massage me, Ma. I feel like I'm coming down with something."

His wife was dejected at being rejected so subtly. Nonetheless she remained obedient to her beloved husband.

"You have a coin, Pa?"

"Look in my pants pockets, Ma."

Mas closed his eyes as he indulged his nostalgia for Sophie.

The wife groped the pockets of her husband's pants piled on the floor. Her hand touched a small hard thing inside a pocket. She pulled it out. Her brow furrowed as she stared at the packaging in her hand that read, Soap – Beautiful Hill Inn, Bar, and Restaurant.

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"Mirror, isn't that the woman who was here yesterday?"

"Yes, Table."

"But he's not the same man as yesterday."

"Table...Table...that's just how it is, no surprise. That guy is always switching partners here too."

"Wow...wow...in these modern times there is nothing extraordinary anymore, Mirror. Everything is super ordinary."

The couple huffed and puffed in bed. The woman's fingers clawed the sheets into disarray. The man's hand grasped the woman's hair tightly. After that they were quiet in their togetherness. The only thing to hear was the huffing of their breath, which gradually quieted down.

All at once the silence was broken by the sound of a ringing cellphone. The woman's hand sought her cellphone on top of the table while her body was still under her partner.

"Sophie! We have to talk!"

"I can't right now."

"Don't avoid it, this is important! I'll call you in half an hour after I get a room number!"

Sophie giggled in her heart, then smiled intimately and intently at the man.

"I have to go right now, there's some work I can't put off."

The man, who looked younger than Sophie, kissed her forehead as though he already understood what Sophie meant. Sophie moved to the bathroom. Under the shower's spray of hot water, Sophie giggled, imagining Si Mas's expression, which must be quite dejected just now. Then she finished her final rinse, without using bath soap.

Jakarta, 15 April 2001

dedicated to all my girlfriends

Bibliography

Ayu, D. M. "Mandi Sabun Mandi." In D. M. Ayu, *Jangan main-main (dengan kelaminmu)*, Jakarta, Indonesia: PT. Gramedia Pustaka Utama (2004): 15-24.

EndNotes

¹ Of mixed parentage, White (historically Dutch) and Indonesian.

² Polite term of address for an unmarried young man but which also might be used by a wife to address her husband. Here, though, it is part of the character's proper name. His full name is Si Mas, and with *si* being a definite article, the character's name, if it weren't for the "hip" connotations, could be translated as *The Man* (except that translation would also maybe serve to conflate him with *sang pria* [which also translates as *the man*], another character at the story's end [don't worry, not a spoiler]). Given these complications, we're leaving the name intact as *Si Mas/Mas* in the story and dealing with the dual meaning here in the apparatus instead. Also, it's pronounced like *sea moss*, if you're interested.

³ *Ma* (and, per later, *Pa*) are terms of endearment used by spouses in Indonesia.